

## HIDDEN IDAHO

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*Nikki Nojima Louis*

You walk between the two posts of the new bookstore in your neighborhood. You don't know why, they're not the same, but they remind you of the frame at the airport. Last year, Sea-Tac, on the way to Boise. Why had you held your breath? You hadn't done anything wrong.

You set off an alarm when you stepped inside the frame. Your wife had just walked through. She turned: a look of wonderment. The young couple standing behind you waited; the woman was holding a baby. The baby laughed and stretched her plump arms toward you. For a moment, you were the center of attention. You'd created a fuss.

The young black man wearing the airport badge said, "Remove your buckle, sir." The silver belt buckle your father had sent you from prison camp, Mexican silver, hammered by Pueblo craftsmen. He had used all his ration stamps to buy it.

"Oh, Kenji," your wife said. "That silly thing."

You took off your belt and put it in the box. The young man waved you through. A heavysset woman moved a wand across your spread-eagled form. When you bent to put on your shoes, you saw the hole in your sock, the big toe sticking through like a pale sausage.

A pilgrimage, the Japanese American Citizens League called it. Your wife wanted to go. "Forget about it," you'd said. What would be there but wind and sagebrush?

"Anyway, I'm going," she said.

There was a stone wall and the chimney of the guardhouse. They were made of lava rock; they had lasted. The memorial plaque and a display of photographs under Plexiglas were new. So was the sign: Hunt Camp 1942–1945. The inmates called it *Minidoka*, an Indian name you thought. The barracks had gone to farmers for tool sheds and cabins for migrant workers; the hospital had been moved to the foothills of the Sawtooth Mountains. But the old ir-

rigation ditch still swelled with water, the sagebrush still grew in clumps, and the dust remained as fine as flour.

The site had seemed small, forlorn. At Manzanar, a white obelisk stretches toward the sky. Photographed by Ansel Adams, backed by the Sierra Nevadas. Majestic. Impermeable. Those Californians, they know how to do things. But there you were in Idaho, you and the others, a group of aging tourists from Seattle or Tacoma, from Eastern Washington or Bainbridge Island, squinting behind dark lenses clipped on eyeglasses, clutching cameras with numb fingers, coats lashed by the wind. Your wife wore a headscarf that made her look eleven years old again. *Babushka*: an old-fashioned word.

In sixth grade, you'd carried her books, her girlfriends giggling alongside, your mind racing for something to say. "Sure it's not too much trouble?" she had asked. Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled. "It's on my way," you lied, and hitched your thumb into your belt like a movie cowboy. You hoped she would notice your new silver buckle. When you got to her barracks, her mother invited you in, but you fled, running home all the way, exhilarated. Your barracks was on the other end of camp.

Fifty years later, you had returned. Some people wept and groped for tissues which the wind snatched, then whirled away. Your wife dabbed at her eyes with the billowing ends of her scarf. But all you felt was anger that Dunks wasn't there. Dunks, who'd argued, fund-raised, organized. Dunks, hooked to tubes on the ninth floor of Seattle General.

The group returned to Boise, the others boarding a chartered bus to Jackpot, Nevada, for gambling and the JACL conference. You and your wife took a cab to the Ikedas, a cozy apartment in a retirement community. George and your father had emigrated from Hiroshima, farmed in Washington together. Ida was your mother's best friend.

Eighty-nine and still sharp. The old man never changes, you thought. He reminded you of a tough brown root, compact and close to the ground. Ida was still plump and jolly, but bent over from osteoporosis.

George talked about farming and the old days. How you could always tell a Japanese farm by its even rows. How for twenty years

he'd farmed in the freezing rain of Washington state. How, after camp, they'd stayed in Idaho for the sunny skies. He didn't mention that he helped save the sugar beet crop during the war, that later he'd been named Farmer of the Year.

Ida passed around a plate of chocolate macaroons.

"I still got the mildew between my toes, huh, Kenji?" George raised a slippered foot, his eyes almost crinkling shut.

The wives began to giggle. Macaroon crumbs tumbled down George's chest. The women laughed until tears filled their eyes. You liked the way your wife's cheeks still dimpled.

"All this time and you've never been back?" your wife asked. "But it's so close by."

"What's to see?" George said.

You sat on their blue-and-gray plaid sofa, a cup and saucer on your knee, and scanned the photographs that filled the walls and mantle, the framed medals, the gold-starred banners, a folded flag in a glass case on the sideboard. No grandkids, you were reminded. They'd lost their boys in the war, one in France, the other missing in action on the alpine slopes of Italy.

It had been good to be home. You were relieved to find your son-in-law waiting at the gate and to sit in the back of his Mazda, breathing in its new-leather scent, listening to your wife's bright chatter. You watched the evening traffic creep along like steady-glowing snails. The buildings loomed over you as you entered the emerald city. The Smith Tower, tallest building in the West when you were a boy, was dwarfed now by buildings that took up half a city block. Your mother once wrote her parents that in America the buildings were so tall they scraped the sky.

Safe in your driveway, you watched your son-in-law extinguish the engine. The car doors opened, then slammed shut. Your granddaughter ran toward you, autumn leaves sticking to the soles of her shoes. Your daughter, pregnant again, followed. "How was it?" she said, placing a hand in the small of her back. She and your wife walked into the house arm in arm. Your son-in-law lifted your bags out of the car's trunk.

Seated at the dining room table, your wife laid out her pho-

tographs. The small memorial. The desolate sign. The lava-rock guardhouse, the sagebrush, the wide sky. You and she and the others squinting into the camera's eye. You craved a nap.

"The Huskies are home. Wanna go to the game tomorrow?" your son-in-law asked, turning on the television.

"Home," you sighed, and sank into your armchair.

You don't approve of the new chain bookstore. This used to be a quiet neighborhood, a small market for groceries, a drug store, the cleaners, a video store. Mom's Café opens at seven for breakfast, closes at three after lunch. All of a sudden there's a multiplex movie theater, a fancy gift shop chain owned by a Hollywood star, an expensive "fusion-Asian" restaurant. The two-story chain bookstore has put the BookMark out of business. You'd known Mark Moody for twenty-seven years—sports, thrillers, biographies—you liked to stop in and browse. Lately, since your stomach started acting up, you veered toward the health and nutrition section. You wish you had your mother's remedies: pickled plum and *okai*, rice porridge. Or her herbal tea, secret ingredients that warmed your insides. Mark closed his bookstore and moved to Sun City. Nothing stays the same.

Now you're walking into the new chain bookstore and past those posts and there's a shrill, pulsating sound. People are turning. Is it you? You realize your keys are in your hand and that you're wearing your big belt buckle. You didn't think these things were metal detectors. What have you done? You jangle the keys over your head, and point to the buckle. You wish you hadn't agreed to come. But you smile and shrug at the blond woman at the counter. She shrugs and smiles back. "Sorry," she says. "It's been doing that all day." Behind you, a woman pushing a double stroller triggers another shrill sound. The blond woman begins her apologies anew.

You follow a sign and take the escalator to the mezzanine, where you stop for a fancy coffee. Foam floats across its surface and you wish you had a spoon; underneath, there's hardly any substance.

You ascend to the top floor. You walk to where they told you the auditorium is located and you pull on the handle, but the door is locked. You're early. You wish you'd waited for your wife.

“Are you nervous?” your daughter had asked at breakfast.  
“It’s only a slide show,” you’d replied, trying to keep the annoyance out of your voice.

“But you have to talk, don’t you?” she said. She patted her full belly. “Is there a Q & A?”

“Leave him alone. He’ll be fine,” your wife had said.

“We’ll be there for you, Daddy,” said your daughter.

The miscellaneous sounds of your wife’s preparations ambushed you—her gargling as she stood at the bathroom sink, the turning on and off of faucets, opening and shutting of drawers, clicks and clacks of the objects she set on the marble counter. The clearing of her throat. Her maddening off-key humming. Her hair dryer was a miniature vacuum cleaner.

You shouted a brief announcement as you sped down the stairs. You heard a faint, “For Pete’s sake, Kenji!” as you skirted out the front door.

You descend to the floor below. Straight ahead is a section marked *Science*. You walk toward it, take down a chunky volume: *Complete Guide to Geology and Mineralogy*.

The book says it’s the reference choice for the international scientific community. You look up desert.

“Desert is not a scientific term,” it says.

You set down the *Complete Guide* and walk to the Children’s Section. On the shelf labeled “Science and Our World,” you come to the *Book of Answers*. You trace your fingers across the large yellow letters outlined in blue and locate the chapter on deserts. On page 22, it asks: “What are deserts?” Below, in a box, is the answer: “Stretches of sand as far as the eye can see.” That’s the Mohave, this one’s the Sahara, you think, picking out the legends under the pictures. What of *your* desert of scrub and sagebrush? Your eyes sting at the slight. You take off your glasses and wipe them on your shirt sleeve.

You sit in a little chair in the Children’s Section and turn the pages of the *Book of Answers*. There is a picture of a turquoise, the kind that’s in your silver belt buckle. Your turquoise has faded; the buckle cuts into your belly, but you want to show it to the audience,

the people you'll be facing in forty-seven minutes. If anyone comes. You want to tell them you've had it for fifty-three years. That your father bought it at the canteen of his prison camp in Santa Fe, along with beaded moccasins for your mother and a Pueblo doll for your sister; that when the package arrived it was stamped "Enemy Alien Mail," and that you and your mother sat on the steps of your barracks while she translated your father's letter. That parts of the letter were blacked out. That you were eleven years old and it was the first package you'd ever gotten in the mail. That you wore the buckle to bed. That you hunted for it in the attic before your "pilgrimage" to Idaho last year and bought a new belt for your widening waist. That you had polished the buckle bright. That it had set off the alarm at the airport last year and made the posts downstairs scream this afternoon.

You're startled by a crackling voice overhead. Storytelling hour is announced on the loudspeaker. Children and their parents begin to approach. You leave the Children's Section.

In the Travel Section, you find a book on Idaho. "Pitch your tent on the moon," says the back cover. You read once that the moon is an ancient volcanic landscape. That has stuck in your mind. One night in 1942, your mother stared out at the desert. Suddenly the moon appeared, large and white, as if it had jumped into the sky. You remember your mother crying out. "Ah! Ah!" Your little sister stood in the doorway of the barracks, clutching your mother's trembling skirt.

Your mother had said your father was away on business and that you and your sister and she were going on a vacation. When you got to the first, temporary, camp you told her: "This is the worst vacation I've ever had." Back home, after the war, you told your class you'd been to camp. "What kind?" asked Betsy O'Reilly. "Boy Scout?"

Idaho is off the beaten path, says one book. A place on the way to somewhere else. Another book promises you out-of-the-world experiences. Climb Seven Devils Trails, it says. Go on a hiker's pilgrimage, stand at Heaven's Gate Outlook, peer into Hell's Canyon. "Only a few million years ago," you read, "there was an almost continuous cataclysm of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and lava flows." You like the sound of "continuous cataclysm."

Lava flows layered Hells Canyon like a torte, writes the author. You smile at the idea of a canyon that looks like a torte and you realize you're hungry. Your stomach growls. You hope your wife will come soon, that she'll bring your Tums and a sandwich. You hope no one has seen your foolish grin or heard your stomach rumble. You try to concentrate. Fiery lava had seeped through cracks in the earth's crust, then cooled. This was about fifteen million years ago. The most recent volcanic activity occurred only 2,000 years ago. Time flies.

Ancestors of the modern camel, horse and rhinoceros lived and died in Idaho. Also, dinosaurs and saber-toothed cats. Yellowstone and the Cascades show the remnants of volcanism. Pictographs and petroglyphs show evidence of life. You wonder if there will be any remnants of yours.

You once saw a TV program that said the desert would reclaim itself. You're not sure what that means, but you remembered it. You remember the Saturday matinees at the Pantages Theater. But first, you had to stack the berry crates and weed the rows. Your father always knew when you were flying through your chores. He would pull the change out of his overalls in agonizing slow motion, then peer into his palm as if wondering what he would find there. When, finally, you plucked the quarter from his thumb and forefinger, you sped across the rain-soaked fields.

"What's hurry, Kenji, huh?" your father shouted.

"*Arigato, Ootosan.*" Thanks Pop, you yelled over your shoulder.

You sped down Pine Hill on your two-wheeler and screeched to a halt in front of the Pantages. "What kept ya?" Dunks said, having arrived a minute earlier. You sat in the dark, a bag of popcorn on your lap, without a care, waiting to be transported to other worlds. *One Thousand Years B.C. Curse of the Cave People. When Dinosaurs Roamed the Earth.*

Shifting sands in an hourglass, pages flying off the calendar. You wonder how long it takes for a tarpaper barracks to turn into desert. Or a wooden watchtower. How long until barbed wire or galvanized tin become indecipherable particles of time?

One of the books says that fossils have preserved the colors of leaves and insects. If you pry open a rock, you may discover an

ancient beetle shell, its blue and green iridescence shimmering before your eyes. You've arrived, a million or so years later. You hold something in your hand that's been perfectly preserved. Exposed, it oxidizes into oblivion.

You find it on page 89:

The actual site of the Minidoka Relocation Center, known to most as the "Hunt Camp," is 20 miles east on Route 25, on the edge of uninhabitable lava lands. A memorial, overlook and historical exhibits mark the site.

These are the facts: Hunt Camp is Idaho's newest ghost town. Between 1942 and 1945, nearly 9,400 people lived there, making it Idaho's eighth largest city. Inmates helped save Idaho's sugar beet crop when most of the farm labor was fighting overseas. The guard station was made of lava rock. You remember the guard, a gap-toothed boy from St. Louis, who had a talking parrot. The bird had encountered so many inmates it spoke English with a Japanese accent.

Minidoka had the highest military casualty rate of the ten internment camps. One in ten camp residents served in the United States Army during World War II. Inside, they grew crops for the war effort. The plots were called Victory Gardens. Eleven of the families on your block lost sons in France or Italy. George and Ida Ikeda lost theirs in both France and Italy. The moms were called Gold Star Mothers.

Hunt Camp is seven miles west of Eden, located in the Magic Valley.

"Slowly and inexorably," one of the books says, "the two tectonic plates that make up most of the North American continent drifted toward each other." You think of doomed lovers, each on a raft of molten rock, trying to reach the other. Of your mother's favorite opera, *Tristan and Isolde*. Of *Duel in the Sun*, the forbidden movie you and Dunks snuck into at the New Pantages after camp. Of how the wild cowboy Luke seduced Pearl, the half-breed Indian girl; how they shot each other across the canyon and crawled across rock and sand to die in each other's arms. Jennifer Jones—your fa-

ther thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world—and Gregory Peck, Atticus Finch to your daughter, but forever outlaw Luke to you.

You and Dunks went to your house and shot cap pistols from opposite ends of your mother's dining room, then crept toward each other on your stomachs. Your shoes made black ridges in your mother's carpet; you knocked over two chairs and a lamp before you met cataclysmically under the dining room table. *Duel in the Sun*. "Oh, Pearl!" "Oh, Luke!"

In camp, you counted the stars with Dunks, lying on your backs in the desert, while searchlights made their slow arcs across the grounds. You dangled on the backs of Army trucks with Dunks, played King of the Mountain on the coal pile outside his mother's barracks, chased the fifth grade girls through the mess hall with Dunks. Later, back home, you fought off the white kids in the school yard. Later still, dorm-mates, best men, fishing pals, golf buddies. Dunks the talker, the doer, the strategy guy. In recent years, you'd lost touch, moved to the suburbs, agreed to disagree. What's past is past, leave it be. Why scratch a scab? You hated a fuss. Diabetes. Heart. He should have lasted longer.

You're startled when you hear your name. "Kenji Takahashi." You tilt your coffee cup and creamy foam drips on your shoe. You close the books on your lap and wipe your shoe with a napkin. The voice has mispronounced your name—*Tack-a-hash*i, reminding you of corn beef and hash. Nevertheless, you're to report to the auditorium. The door is no longer locked.

When you arrive at the top, a shiny-faced youth tells you he's set up the slide projector. You look around the large room. "My friend was supposed to do this," you tell him. "He was very good at it."

The young man tells you they're expecting a full house. A stack of folding chairs leans against one wall, in front of which a poster rests on a stand. Henry "Dunks" Shigeno's photograph grins out at you. His name is covered by a strip of paper on which your name is written in permanent marker. You have no photograph.

"It's my first time," you say, and finger the box of slides in your pocket. It fits snugly in your palm and that is reassuring.

"Would you like a run-through?" asks the young man. "There's

time.” The white screen looms ahead. You walk to the projector and drop each slide into the thin slots of the carousel.

“Lights, please?” you say, and wait for the dark.

Click. The deck of the *America Maru*, 1918. Young men waving at the camera. Which of those earnest faces belongs to your father and his friend, George, labor contracts in their pocket, worn sea-bags slung over their shoulders? “America, in America/Dollars grow on trees,” your father writes in his diary. Tanka poetry. “You just reach up and pick them.”

Click. A line of picture brides outside an immigration office in Tacoma, Washington, 1921. Which kimono-clad figure is your mother, waiting for the stranger she had married by proxy on an opposite shore? “Parting tearfully,” her tanka poem reads. “Holding a one way ticket/I sail far away.”

Click. Three women sit for a formal portrait at their arrival at San Francisco Harbor, 1923. Your mother’s sister, Mayumi, poses with two school friends. They are dressed in the bright-colored kimonos of young, unmarried women. A large bow perches on top of Mayumi’s upswept hair. She sits, holding a folding-fan, halfway open on her lap. One friend stands behind her, a delicate hand placed on your aunt’s shoulder. The other girl carries a silk parasol.

Click. The same young women have returned to the photographic studio a week later, wearing tube-shaped dresses that end above the knee, silk stockings, and pointed shoes with enormous buckles. Your aunt’s kohl-lined eyes stare vamp-like under her spangled headband, giant spit curls coil around her cheekbones. A strand of glittering beads dangles to her waist. A pout rests on her bee-stung lips.

You blink at the shadows of your past. You click through the slides that in twenty minutes you will reveal to an audience. You check their order, running through your mind words that will tell the story of the slides. Will the unknown, then, be known? Will anyone remember? Will anyone care? You dread the question-and-answer period. Dunks said that was always the hardest part. “Why did you go?” “How did you feel?” “Why didn’t you protest?” “Weren’t you pissed?”

Click. You stare at your pre-war self, with Dunks, ages nine and nine-and-a-half. You'd helped dynamite stumps to clear for strawberries fields. You and Dunks wear identical shirts, goldenrod yellow with a black zigzag pattern, from a bolt of cloth a peddler had traded your father for a flat of strawberries. Your mother had made shirts out of the material for you and Dunks; aprons too, a dress for your sister, and curtains for the kitchen windows. Later, in Minidoka, your mother sewed the curtains together to make a long panel to partition the barracks, where eight families lived. Everyone on the block called yours the zigzag apartment.

Click. The sun beats down. Your mother, father, and three Nisqually Indians stoop over rows of strawberry plants. You and Dunks stand in the foreground, wearing your identical shirts. Big shots, brown arms flung on each other's shoulders, stolid legs straddling the plantings. You grin into the camera with your young sweaty faces, into the future with your laughing eyes.